



Commerce and
Culture in
the BAY
OF
BENGAL
1500 - 1800

Edited by
Om Prakash
Denys Lombard

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Religious and Scholarly Exchanges between the Singhalese Sangha and the Arakanese and Burmese Theravadin Communities: Historical Documentation and Physical Evidence

Catherine Raymond

INTRODUCTION

Presently a component state within the Union of Burma, Arakan was—for at least a full millennium preceding its extinction in 1784—an independent kingdom with a well-documented and illustrious history. Buddhism apparently came to Arakan comparatively early, and in the legends and traditions of the Arakanese, an exemplary, uncorrupted strain of Theravada was maintained there over the centuries, even until today.

Numerous references are made in the classical chronicles of the Singhalese on one side of the Bay of Bengal, and of the Arakanese and the Burmese on the other, to monastic and scholarly exchanges of paramount importance towards re-animating their respective sanghas after periods of decline. (In some cases, military or economic assistance was also sought, especially where non-Buddhist invaders threatened established Buddhist primacy.) Yet very little physical evidence has so far been identified, dated or catalogued corroborating the tradition of significant Buddhist links between Ceylon and Burma (including Arakan). The unexpected recent discovery in Arakan of a collection of bronze Buddha images in the Singhalese style, and evidently of Ceylonese origin, is at the centre of the research presented here.

My objective is to show the role played by the court and sangha of the former kingdom of Arakan in the preservation of Theravada Buddhism in Ceylon, particularly during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. To this end, I have examined local chronicles, epigraphical documents, Singhalese manuscripts, and foreign

(usually Western) sources. This is in addition to material archaeological evidence including items of statuary and certain religious structures erected during the Mrauk-u¹ period, i.e. 1430 through 1784 AD.

THE SITTWE BRONZES

In November 1993 I had an opportunity to visit the new religious museum in Sittwe, where now on exhibition are most valuable and extraordinary collections of Arakanese Buddhist sculptures and Buddhist votive tablets in terracotta. Additionally, the museum houses the personal numismatic collection of the late U San Tha Aung, which includes Arakanese coins from the sixth through the eighteenth centuries.²

An assemblage of more than one hundred bronze Buddha images carefully conserved since the fall of the Arakanese kingdom in 1785 AD and jealously protected (in a state of semi-secrecy) since then by the U Pandita monastery comprises another key element of the Sittwe collection. These bronzes have been obtained from all of the regions within Arakan proper, and they provide an excellent illustration of specific iconography of the period. Among the Sittwe bronzes were nine Buddha images—of which seven were from U Pandita—that immediately struck me as most probably being of Singhalese rather than Arakanese (or Burmese) origin as was heretofore generally assumed.

THE TEXTUAL SOURCES

To study the historical context of the apparent exchanges between Ceylon and Arakan, the initial sources have been:

The Arakanese chronicles. Unfortunately, in addition to the rarity and

¹In this paper, the transliteration of the original Arakanese terms (or place names) which have become conventional in English language scholarship will generally be used. Note, however, that some cited references adopt the Burmese name for the Arakanese capital, which is ordinarily transliterated as *Myohaung*.

²U San Tha Aung, eminent Arakanese scholar, wrote in Burmese on different aspects of ancient Arakan; especially on epigraphy, numismatics, and iconography. Only his volume on Rakhine iconography—*The Buddhist Art in Ancient Arakan*—has been translated into English. His former residence has been given lately to the U Pandita monastery to house its valuable collection of religious artifacts.

obscure of the documents themselves, scholarly access to Arakan itself is hardly easy. Few, accordingly, of the Arakanese chronicles have ever been translated or printed, apart from informal photocopying.³

The Burmese chronicles. The Burmese chronicles are much more accessible, some even having been partly translated and published in English. The better known amongst them are regularly reprinted in Burmese.⁴

The Sinhalese chronicles. For Ceylon, I have been using as the primary sources the *Mahavamsa* and the *Culavamsa* in the widely-distributed English translations by Geiger.

An additional class of primary sources is comprised of several Sinhalese manuscripts specifically referring to relations with Arakan.⁵

A third category of primary data are Arakanese temple inscriptions commemorating the arrival from Lanka of the *Tipitaka*, or other texts. We also should mention that the Arakanese chronicles cite the building of libraries dedicated to housing newly arrived collections of the scriptures, most of them from Ceylon. These same sources have identified 48 such libraries as having been established in Mrauk-u alone between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries.⁶

Of the primary sources of Western origin, there are predominantly Dutch writings and maps, including ships logs, VOC ledgers, and the official diaries of various trade and administrative figures.⁷

³The main Arakanese chronicles are Doewa (1764), *Rakhaing Razawingyi*; and Kavisara (1787) *Rakhaing ah Ray tau Phone*. I found a copy of this manuscript in Ramu (Bangladesh) but it is very difficult to locate a complete version of any Arakanese manuscript. We have to use the two main references available, which are secondary sources only: the works of Ashin Candamalalankara in 2 vols. and *Dinnyawadi Yazawinyithi*. Although secondary sources, they are nevertheless essential.

⁴They are three main Burmese chronicles easily available in Myanmar: *Shin Thilawunthat Yawawin gyaw* (1520); *U Kala, Maha Yazawin Gyi* (1714)—partly translated into English under the title 'The Glass Palace Chronicle'; and *Hmanan Yazawin* (1829).

⁵Cf. Kadadora Grant (1952); Jayatilaka (1940); and Fernando (1959)

⁶A team of Arakanese scholars has in 1988 published its collective research under the title *Rakhaing-prene Phritsaing Thamaing Hmâ*. All five volumes are available in Burma (in Burmese only). The first two—of greatest interest to us—are on epigraphy, and Rakhine history and culture.

⁷Amongst the VOC documentation available at the Hague, I found—through the *Koeman Atlantes Neerlandici* under *Keu* 135(62)—a very interesting navigation chart dated 1661, specially compiled for VOC's mariners (cf. biblio, ref. 'Diary de Here').

ICONOGRAPHY

The iconographic analyses here have been predicated mostly upon the typology established for Ceylonese Buddhist sculptures, largely because of the evident similarity of this material to classical Ceylonese forms, but also because no such typologies have been so far established in any depth for the Arakanese and Burmese materials.

Regarding the cultural artifacts of Mrauk-u, our principal source has been a recent comprehensive survey published in Burmese (but conducted by a team of Arakanese scholars) inventorying sculpture, architecture, epigraphy, and numismatics.⁸

PHYSICAL SETTING AND CULTURAL ORIENTATION

Arakan is the elongated north-western region of Burma, contiguous with present-day Bangladesh, and encompassing 600 km of the Bay of Bengal coast (not including the complex shoreline made up of innumerable small islands, estuaries, lagoons, and inlets), and separated from 'mainland' Burma by the Arakan Yoma, a nearly-unbroken range of high mountains traversed only by a small number of isolated and difficult passes.⁹

Geographically, Arakan comprises the critical bridge between the Indian subcontinent and the lands and cultures of South-East Asia. While the convoluted Arakan coastline would appear to offer easy access to the sea, large protected harbours and clear passages are few, and it is a shore not particularly hospitable to navigators lacking detailed local knowledge. Even so, passage to Arakan by sea was still comparatively easier than access overland through the Yoma. Thus, Arakan was so gifted by its geography as to be able to maintain a fierce independence for nearly a millennium prior to its final conquest by the Burmese King Bodawpaya in 1784-5.

Until, then, the Arakanese kingdom would sometimes choose its alliances with the Hindu and Muslim dynasties of Bengal to the north-west, and would accordingly be more receptive towards those cultures. At other times, however, the Arakanese would be politically allied (or temporarily subjugated to), the Burmese kingdoms to the east—the successive dynasties at Pagan, Ava, Pegu, and Amarapura.

⁸Cf. note 6.

⁹The two principal overland routes through the Arakan Yoma are the Taunggyi and the Am Passes (cf. Lejder, 'Route de Am', forthcoming).

with cultural exchanges concomitantly oriented in that direction.

The historic boundaries of Arakan have expanded or shrunk with the military prowess and administrative abilities of the various Arakanese kings: at its apogee in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the kingdom of Arakan extended even beyond Chatgaon (well into Bengal) and encompassed about twice the territory of the present state of Arakan within the Union of Burma.

Even if the more ancient history of Arakan, the first millennium, is relatively obscure, the archaeological remains of that period—structures and earthworks, iconography, epigraphy, numismatics and sculpture—are extensive. It is evident from these that during this period Arakan displayed a highly-developed and generally Indianized civilization, where Theravada Buddhism and classical Hinduism coexisted.

EARLY ARAKANESE HISTORY: THE MAHAMUNI LEGEND AND THE ORIGINS OF ARAKANESE BUDDHISM

If we accept as factually accurate the Mahamuni legend as related in the ancient Arakanese manuscript (in Pali) entitled *Sappadanapakarana*¹⁰—translated into English in the late nineteenth century (Forchhammer, 1891)—Buddhism has a particularly long history in Arakan. According to these tales, Candrasuriya, king of Dhaññavati during Buddha's lifetime, was graced by a personal visit from Lord Buddha. Unfortunately, this legend conflicts with several references in the Arakanese epigraphy that King Candrasuriya did not ascend the throne of Arakan until AD 146. This date has been corroborated numismatically only to the degree that it is broadly accepted that a king named Candrasuriya did reign over a third Dhaññavati capital during the second century.

The *Sappadanapakarana* describes how the Buddha, with his retinue of five hundred *arahats* flew miraculously from India to Arakan to preach a great sermon on Selagiri Hill (near Dhaññavati) overlooking Kyautaw, across the river Kaladan. The Buddha's week-long visit was a great success: the king, his court and all his subjects were passionately converted to the new faith. Before departing, the king prevailed on the Buddha to allow an exact likeness of himself to

¹⁰Lengthy extracts from *Sappadanapakarana*—sometimes also referred to as the *Sarvathanapakarana*—were translated by Forchhammer who, unfortunately, does not specify the provenance of that Mss.

be made as a continual reminder of the truth and goodness of his teachings. The Buddha agreed, and with considerable help from the gods, the inhabitants of Dhaññavati cast a bronze image under the Buddha's personal supervision. After the sacred image was finished, it was installed with pomp and ceremony on a small hill close to the city (Fraser-Lu, 1987, paraphrasing Forchhammer, 1891).

With the passage of time, the Mahamuni site became a major religious centre for the Arakanese, as well as for pilgrims from neighbouring Buddhist states who, understandably, were extremely envious of the Mahamuni image. Other manuscripts describe how various kings of the historic Burmese capitals—Sri Ksettra, Pagan and Pegu—had mounted periodic forays into Arakan with the expressed intention of carrying off for themselves the Mahamuni image, considered by the Arakanese as the 'palladium' of their kingdom, i.e. the vehicle of its divine protection. (A parallel case is the description of the *Glass Palace Chronicle* of Aniruddha, the king of Pagan's unsuccessful attempt to seize the Mahamuni in the eleventh century.)

However flawed the *Sappadanapakarana* may be factually, that manuscript does attest to a comparatively early date for the manufacture of Buddha images, and certainly reinforces the assumption that Buddhism arrived in Arakan well prior to its acceptance in Burma.

Lithic inscriptions, in Sanskrit, found (in 1940) in the vicinity of Vesali confirm that Buddhism was already well established there comparatively early in the Christian era: they describe merit offerings made by the two Kings Niti Candra and Vira Candra. An inscription there records 'the perpetual deeds of merit and charity done by the king—and in the case of Niti Candra, by his queen, Savitam Candrasuriya—in solemn devotion towards the Buddha' (Sircar, 1957; and U San Tha Aung, 1979).

While the Niti Candra stela does not specify the nature of that king's offering, the Vira Candra stela mentions that he constructed one hundred Buddha stupas. In light of the epigraphical analysis, these two stelae can be dated to around the sixth century. These names and dates have been further corroborated numismatically, as well as epigraphically, by means of the inscription on the Ananda Candra pillar—now preserved at the Shitthaung temple of Mrauk U, and dated paleographically to the early eighth century—enumerating all the kings believed to have ruled over Vesali and Dhanuvin.

before King Ananda Candra. The Ananda Candra pillar specifies the reign of Niti Candra as from 520-75, and that of Vira Candra from 575-8 (Sircar, 1957).

According also to the Ananda Candra pillar inscription, it would appear that Dhaññavati was the capital of Arakan until about 370, followed thereafter by Vesali, which remained the capital at least until 597. The archaeological remains of both cities reveal an outer city wall and an inner moated city surrounding a palace site where, presumably, royalty and officials would have resided. Commoners occupied the outer city and cultivated rice within its confines. Stone statues from both the Hindu and Buddhist pantheon, dating as far back as the fifth century have been recovered from the vicinities of both Dhaññavati and Vesali. (Although cruder than some Indian work, Pala and Gupta influences are clearly evident in these sculptures.)

Arguments can be made, based on the iconography, that while the political capital may have been moved from one site to the other, both Dhaññavati and Vesali—cities situated generally above the river Kaladan—were more or less contemporary. Political instability however followed a period of Shan invasions, with a succession of temporary capitals, located mostly along the river Lemro: these included Sambawak, Pyinsa, Parein, Hkrit, and Launggret.

It is in the *Sappadanapakarana*, which was apparently written during the Mrauk-u period, that references are first found to Buddhist religious exchange between Arakan and Ceylon: the *Sappadanapakarana* mentions the pilgrimage of Singhalese bhikkhus as well as those from other countries coming to pay homage to the Mahamuni image.

A stone inscription dated to 1256 narrates the visit to Ceylon of the Arakanese King Alawmaphru.¹¹ Known—because of his considerable enlargement of Arakanese territories—as a great ruler, Alawmaphru was also an erudite Buddhist scholar and expert in monastic discipline. (The inscription noted that this visit was by sea, implying that such a pilgrimage could alternately have been made overland through India.)

It should also be noted that certain other Arakanese chronicles claim that Ceylon and Arakan actually initiated religious inter-

¹¹Grossly inconsistent dates for the reigns of several of the Rakhine kings are provided by different primary and secondary sources.

actions as early as the second century, when during the reign of King Thuriyathiri (201-21)¹² twelve Arakanese monks led by Nanasiridhipati Mahathera were sent to Ceylon as missionaries. A certain skepticism is probably warranted here as there has so far been found no corroboration for such early encounters, either from elsewhere in Arakan, or from Singhalese sources.

ARAKANES-CEYLONESE INTERACTIONS DURING THE MRAUK-U PERIOD

It was at an upland site between the Lemro and the Kaladan that the final capital, Mrauk-u, which served as the seat of Arakanese independence for its last 350 years, was raised.¹³ Here, a much less Indianized civilization (compared to the cultures of Dhaññavati, Vesali, and the Lemro river cities) was established and this is where Arakanese Buddhism reached its apotheosis. The Golden Age of Mrauk-u serves as a landmark in religious cooperation between Arakan and Ceylon.

In terms of religious and political exchanges with other parts of the Buddhist world—and interactions with the Ceylonese *sangha* particularly—the creation of the new Arakanese capital at Mrauk-u was especially portentous: an apparent convention in classic Theravada Buddhist culture requires that a capital city—serving as the seat of both secular and religious affairs—should meet certain specific criteria to be fully legitimized. These include the presence (or the erection, if necessary) of a major stupa containing a significant relic, and the establishment of one or more libraries housing a complete set of canonical texts.

According to the *Sappadanapakarana*, in 1439 King Khari (also known by his Islamic name, Ali Khan), the brother of the founder of Mrauk-u, received a copy of the *Tiṭitaka* from Ceylon, and

¹²*Rakhaing-prene Phritsaing Thamaing Hmâ*, vol. I, 1984, p. 120.

¹³The river Thinganadi, a tributary of the Kaladan, is navigable as far as Mrauk-u. (Mrauk-u town is slightly south of the former site of Vesali, on the river Kaladan.) The interesting etymology of the place name *Mrauk-u* is as follows: '*Mrauk* means "accomplishment" and *u* means "first". In Arakan, the old pronunciation is still preserved in spite of the corrupted form *Myauk-u* that crept in with the Burmese conquest in 1782 [sic]. To explain this later perversion, a very silly story was invented in later times; a female monkey is supposed to have mated with a peacock causing the former to lay an egg on the spot which afterwards, on that account, came to be known as *Myauk-u*; *Myauk* being a monkey, and *u* an egg.' Cf. San Shwe Bu, *JBR*, vol. VI, 1916.

entrusted the text to a new library at the Mahamuni pagoda, to be used as a reference set for the Arakanese sangha.

Similarly, in 1476 Basawphru (aka Kalima Shah)¹⁴ the son of Min Khari requested of the Singhalese another complete set of the *Tipitaka*. This was received the same year, and was placed in a library established in the new capital. In gratitude, Basawphru sent a religious delegation led by Ven. Siddharta back to Lanka. An ola leaf manuscript, the Kadadora Grant (1952) found in Ceylon refers to religious intercourse during the sixteenth century with Rakkhangapura (one of several names for Arakan that appear in the Singhalese sources). This information is corroborated by the *Culavamsa*, and the *Sulupujavaliya*.

At the beginning of the sixteenth century, the Arakanese kingdom was well en-route towards its apogee: territories lost to the Shan invasions of a hundred years before were now fully recovered, and a considerable part of Bengal—extending north and east beyond Chatgaon—was completely within the Arakanese orbit.¹⁵ In 1501, Min Raza began his reign, consolidating the previous gains of the kingdom.

In 1531, one of the principal figures in Arakanese history ascended the Arakanese throne: Min Bin (son of Min Raza). With the assistance of Portuguese military engineers, Min Bin vastly improved the fortifications of Mrauk-u, modernizing the city walls and the surrounding moats. Additionally, Min Bin erected stupas and temples interspersed throughout the kingdom, supplying each stupa with a copy of the *Tipitaka*—sometimes in stone, sometimes in metal—for inclusion in the relic chamber. The *Tipitakas* supplied previously to Basawphru by the Singhalese were apparently the prototypes of those used to consecrate Min Bin's stupas. More significantly perhaps, Min Bin enshrined in the Andaw stupa in Mrauk-u itself a copy of the tooth relic—the palladium of Singhalese Buddhism. (The original was then already in Kandy.)¹⁶

¹⁴The habit of Rakhine Buddhist kings of taking Arabic (or Farsi) names and titles, and incorporating Islamic epigrams on their coinage was apparently done in deference to the sensibilities of their Muslim Chittagonian subjects. The dispute as to whether Arakan was a Buddhist or a Muslim kingdom—engendered by such practices—has had powerful repercussions down to the present time, especially *vis-à-vis* Bangladeshi/Burma relations.

¹⁵See note 14.

¹⁶Note that Harvey (1925) incorrectly attributed three major stupas to Min Bin, which were not in fact built by him. Among these was *Andawpaya*, which was actually built by Min Bin's father, Min Raza in 1521.

During the reign of Min Phalaung (1571-93), builder of the great Dukkhanthein pagoda in Mrauk-u, primary sources record, was built a library specifically to house a new set of the *Tiṭṭaka* from Ceylon.

This was a period of severe crisis in Ceylonese Buddhism, following the arrival there of the Portuguese who succeeded in mass conversions of Singhalese Buddhists (particularly amongst the fishing castes) in areas under their influence. This was compounded by the incumbency on the Kandyan throne of one or more kings who apparently were not converts, but nevertheless actively hostile to Buddhism.

Subsequent kings of Ceylon sought to reverse the deterioration of the Singhalese sangha. Early in the course of his reign King Vimaladhamma Surya I (1592-1604) recognized the essential need for learned monks to help restore the degraded sangha. Accordingly, he sent a mission to 'Rakhangapura' specifically to invite Nandicakka—one of the leading Arakanese *theras*¹⁷—whose reputation apparently had even reached Ceylon.

On a date unspecified by the source, within the reign of the Arakanese king Min-raza-Gri (1593-1612)¹⁸, Vimaladhamma Surya I's gift-bearing envoys arrived in Mrauk-u. In response, Min-raza-Gri (aka Min Yaza Gyi or Salim Shah) dispatched twenty learned monks to Ceylon under the leadership of the two venerables Candravilasa Mahathera¹⁹ and Nandicakka, as requested. (Candravilasa had previously made two such trips to Lanka.) Upon their arrival in Ceylon the bhikkhus staged a reformation campaign in the Singhalese sangha and properly conducted the ordination—*upasampada*—ceremony at Udaku-khepa sima.²⁰

While Arakan may have then been at a high point of its history, during this same period the kingdom of Burma (under Nanda Bayin,

¹⁷*Thera* is the Pali term for a monk advanced usually in both knowledge and in years, and is often translated as 'venerable'.

¹⁸Phayre (1883) indicates the accession of Min Raza Gri to the Arakanese throne occurred in 1593, while Harvey (1925) cited 1595 as the date of that event.

¹⁹Note that name of 'Candravilasa' is spelled differently in other references. Jayatilake (1940) uses the name 'Candivisala'; while Miranda (1985) called him 'Candadilasa'.

²⁰The primary source here is a Singhalese ola leaf Mss # o.r. 6611 (258)—now in the British Museum—entitled *Rakkhanghasasana Curnikava*, which includes the correspondence of Vimaladhamma Surya I regarding the arrival and high caliber of the Rakhine monks.

1581-99) was characterized by a relative decline of Buddhism. Burma was in turmoil; factionally divided into a number of small states, and Pegu—once a great centre of Theravada Buddhism—was depopulated by famine, war and internal conflict. This situation prevailed there for the following several decades.

According also to the *Sappadanapakarana*, a great religious revival took place in Arakan under King Thuriya (aka Sirisuriya, ruled 1684-5). Thuriya built several new monasteries and *upasampada sima* (ordination halls) near the Mahamuni pagoda.

The Buddhist revival in Ceylon under Vimaladamma Suriya I was apparently weakened or undermined by the turmoil stemming from the Portuguese presence and by their continuing crusade against Buddhism. The Portuguese were finally expelled from Ceylon in 1656 by Raja Sinha II (1632-84), with the help of the Dutch.

Some decades later, the Kandyan King Vimaladhamma Suriya II, like his great uncle, felt the need to re-establish the primacy of Theravada Buddhism in Ceylon and to upgrade the quality of the Singhalese sangha. Drawing on his friendly relations with the Dutch—whose interests were limited to commerce rather than conversion, and whose political sphere remained in the coastal regions generally removed from the Kandyan orbit—Vimaladhamma Suriya II arranged in 1696 for a Dutch ship, the *Bomba*, to go to Arakan on a special mission, carrying twenty Singhalese emissaries and officials bearing Pali documents, and *bana* letters from the Ceylonese king to the king of Arakan.

A year later, another Dutch ship brought a second Singhalese embassy to Arakan, this time offering a complete set of the *Tipitaka*, and requesting the dispatch of Arakanese *theras* to perform higher ordinations. That ship returned with 33 Arakanese *theras* and *bhikkhus* to perform *upasampada* in Lanka.

The *Culavamsa* and the *Sasanavamsa* contain important records of several religious exchanges between Arakan and Ceylon during Vimaladhamma Surya II's reign. Both chronicles refer to the arrival of the Singhalese envoy in Rakhangapura²¹ and the critical role played in restoration of the Ceylonese Buddhist sangha by Arakanese *theras* and *bhikkhus*, describing the Singhalese embassy dispatched by Vimaladhamma Surya II, and elaborating how the Arakanese King Maruppya (1696-7) selected Ven. Indamanju—the abbot of

²¹ *Culavamsa*, XCIV, pp. 15-16, and *Sasanavamsa*, p. 27.

Sattatthana monastery—to be the leader of a mission returning to Ceylon in 1696.²²

The site of ordinations—in which several members of the Singhalese royal family and many lesser nobles took religious vows—was at Getamba, near Peredeniya on the *Mahavalukaganga* (or Mahaweli Ganga). The Singhalese chronicles indicate that this great ceremony occurred in 1696, indicating a discrepancy of date with the documents of the Dutch VOC.²³

Whatever salutary effects Maruppya's emissaries may have had on the Ceylonese sangha, the secular situation in Arakan itself had by that time already been deteriorating for more than fifty years—even if the calibre of Arakanese Buddhist scholarship and practice was not yet degraded (Okkantha, 1990). The death in 1638 of King Thirithudhamma ended the last glorious reign of the Mrauk-u period: by 1670, the Mughals had reconquered all of Bengal east and south of the river Meghna, including the vital port city of Chatgaon. Thereafter, the succession of Arakanese kingships was generally brief, and often ignominious; a process of decline that continued inexorably until the final extinction of the Arakanese nation by Bodawpaya. Warlords, rebels, usurpers, and a sequence of incompetent monarchs had by then so demoralized the population that many Arakanese were initially optimistic that Bodawpaya might 'clean things up': hopes soon enough dashed by a genocidal suppression of Arakanese resistance almost modern in its ferocity.

PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS

(a) *Textual materials*

The pre-existing religious relationship between Ceylon and Arakan was a key factor towards re-animating and restoring Theravada Buddhism in Ceylon—as regards the proper performance of religious ceremonies generally, and higher ordinations within the Singhalese sangha more particularly. In recompense, at various intervals the Arakanese received many copies of the canonical texts (of which there seemed to be a surfeit in Lanka). These texts themselves played a vital role in legitimizing the secular and religious authority of the Arakanese. They further served to maintain a continuity of Arakanese

²² *Rakhaing Magazine*, vol. IV, 1977, p. 133.

²³ *Culavamsa*, XCIV, p. 15.

Buddhist practice and tradition that could and would be drawn upon by the Singhalese during periods of decline of their own sangha.

Indigenous chronicles—Sometimes describing events which might have taken place years or even generations earlier—were generally prepared in specific response to royal edicts. Thus their content may well have been subject to exaggeration or distortion serving towards the reinforcement of state Buddhism, or towards the aggrandizement and glorification of the patron of the chronicle.

While early Western accounts of exploration or interactions with the Arakanese or the Singhalese were certainly not free from prejudice, misunderstanding and delusion, in many or most cases they represented actual first-hand observations—frequently in the highly-factualized formats of gubernatorial diaries, ships' logs or mercantile ledgers. Accordingly, their reliability might be greater in certain categories, especially in terms of dating events also described in the Asian chronicles—where four different calendar systems only add to the confusion.

(b) Iconographic presentation of the collection

The assemblage of nine Buddha images (plus one shrine with the Buddha missing) at the focus of our study are all in bronze; one of them is standing with hands and arms arranged in typical Singhalese mudras (see below), while the other eight have the Buddha seated in *samadhi*, with the legs crossed and arranged in *virasana*. Above the head in all nine Buddha statues is the symbolic flame, *usnisa*. The seven seated images are all placed on rectangular pedestals, with two pillars rising from the rear corners of each of the pedestals to support variations of crowning arch, *makara torana*.

At the apex of the *makara torana*, additional symbolic embellishments are also found. In three of the sculptures, the apical device is a *kirtimukha*: a demonic figure out of the mouths which appear to flow to the two adjacent arms of the arch. In three others, the *makara torana* is a strictly floral design, while in the single remaining sculpture, the device at the apex has been broken off.

These specific forms—*makara torana* and *kirtimukha*—have been inspired by Indian and Ceylonese monumental architecture from periods long preceding their appearance as a characteristic motif in the small bronzes of the late Polonnaruwa era.

Examples of such small bronzes, from Dedigama, in central

Ceylon, have been dated positively from the reign of Prakramabahu I (1153-96). Accordingly, there is broad agreement that sculptures of this type, sometimes in embossed gold, have their origins no later than the twelfth century. (The Singhalese chronicles cite images of exactly this type as having been carried by embassies to other Buddhist countries.)

In Burma, apart from this specific collection in Arakan, no Buddha images of this type have so far been found. The *samadhi* posture of the seven seated Buddha images are particularly uncharacteristic of Burmese and Arakanese Buddha images, virtually all of which—subsequent to the establishment of Buddhism as the state religion in Burma by King Aniruddha (1044-77)—are in *bhumisparsa mudra*.

By comparison, Singhalese Buddhist statuary of the same period is ordinarily in the *samadhi* posture, with the knees typically extended fully toward the sides and the hands joined and resting in the lap. In this same period, a huge quantity of small bronzes with the Buddha in the *samadhi* attitude, and with the *makara torana* arch, were cast for official gifts, for monastic purposes, and also for the home altars of lay persons and pilgrims. Additionally, these images were in some cases brought home by foreign pilgrims or scholars visiting Lanka, and in other cases, were conveyed as gifts or offerings by Singhalese monks, pilgrims or emissaries travelling overseas.

According to my earlier study (Raymond, 1994) of the iconography of the Sittwe bronzes of apparent Ceylonese provenance, it appears that their date of origin probably ranges between the thirteenth and the eighteenth centuries. Thus these Buddha images in Arakan—derived originally from different collections throughout Arakan—provide us a preliminary body of 'physical evidence' supportive of the tradition of Singhalese/Arakanese religious exchanges.

Nevertheless, we cannot draw too many conclusions from such a comparatively small number of artifacts, especially since the objects themselves lack inscriptions. Furthermore, no explicit histories of their provenance have been passed on to us, and we have not yet performed any metallurgical analyses indicative of their geographic origin or age. An additional caveat is that we have not found obvious Singhalese influence in the religious architecture of Mrauk-U at least in terms of the extant structures of the relevant period.

A final point is that the indigenous chronicles usually describe the gifts borne by religious emissaries only in very general terms, as 'precious presents' or 'offerings to the sangha'. With the recent

identification of statuary found in Arakanese collections as being most probably of Ceylonese origin, we can more confidently assert that such gifts and offerings may have included the particular bronze Buddha images catalogued below (see Plates 1-8).

CATALOGUE

1. Seated Buddha, Singhalese type
Sittwe Museum, Arakan
height: 8 cm.
provenance: Vesali

Bronze; solid cast in one piece with hollow pedestal. Buddha, with a conical flame—*usnisa*—rising above the Buddha's hair, is seated in *samadhi*; the legs in *virasana* upon a rectangular pedestal, in front of an arch shrine covered in floral decoration and supported by two pillars without any decoration beside a range of beads on the external side. In the centre of the arch is a floral design above which is the summit of a stupa. (A very similar bronze has been found in Thailand in Ayutthya district, in the relic chamber of a stupa positively identified as having been constructed in the thirteenth century.)

Ref. Schroeder (1990), p. 386, pl. 114c, 114e, 114f.

2. Seated Buddha, Singhalese type
Sittwe Museum, Arakan
height: 5.5 cm
provenance: Vesali

Bronze; solid cast in one piece with hollow pedestal. Buddha, with *usnisa* rising above the hair, is seated in *samadhi*, the legs are in *virasana* upon a rectangular pedestal, in front of an arch shrine covered in floral decoration and supported by two pillars only slightly decorated. Rising from the apex of the arch is the summit of a stupa.

3. Seated Buddha, Singhalese type
Sittwe Museum, Arakan
height: 13 cm
provenance: Vesali

Bronze; solid cast in one piece with hollow pedestal. Buddha, with conical flame rising above the hair, seated in *samadhi*, legs in

virasana, on a rectangular pedestal, in front of an arch shrine covered in floral decoration and supported by two pillars with visible capitals. Pillars undecorated except for a range of beads on the internal side. In the centre of the arch is a floral design. The quality of the casting is comparatively poor and the floral design is not very well defined.

4. Seated Buddha, Singhalese type
Sittwe Museum, Arakan
height: 15.8 cm, Buddha image 6.8 cm
provenance: Vesali

Bronze; solid cast in two pieces with hollow pedestal. Buddha, with *usnisa* is seated in *samadhi*, the legs in *virasana*, on a rectangular pedestal with a floral motif along its foot. Arch of shrine covered in floral decoration and supported by two *makaras*. Pillars are decorated with incised floral motifs. The centre of the arch is crowned with a *kirtimukha* figure in very much the classical Singhalese manner.

5. Seated Buddha, Singhalese type
Sittwe Museum, Arakan
height overall: 16 cm; height of statue: 7.4 cm
provenance: Vesali

Bronze; solid cast in two pieces with hollow pedestal. Buddha, with *usnisa* is seated in *samadhi*, the legs are in *virasana* upon a double rectangular pedestal with capitals. Capitals well-ornamented with a floral motif, in front of a shrine arch also displaying an extensive floral motif and supported by two pillars with capitals; undecorated other than a range of beads on the internal side. The arch is heavily decorated with floral design, conch shape, above which the *makara* and the *kirtimukha* appear to be either wilfully substituted or misunderstood.

6. Seated Buddha, Singhalese type
Sittwe Museum, Arakan
height: 16 cm, statue: 7.4 cm
provenance: Vesali

Bronze; cast in two pieces with hollow pedestal, simply decorated with incised simple geometric design. Buddha, *usnisa* above the hair, in *samadhi*, legs in *virasana*, on a double rectangular pedestal.

with capitals visibly ornamented in a floral design. Arch-shrine is also covered in relatively crude incised floral decorations and is supported by two pillars with two capitals, undecorated other than a strand of beading on the internal side. The arch is decorated with a somewhat primitive incised floral design, above which appears to be the stub of a *kirtimukha* now lost.

7. Seated Buddha, Singhalese type

Mrauk-u Museum, Arakan

height: 16.5 cm, Buddha image 8.4 cm

provenance: Vesali

An extremely complex item comprised of three individual castings. The decorated pedestal is comprised of five levels, and the tabs cast into its foot suggest that the pedestal was formerly part of a larger piece. The Buddha is seated in *samadhi* on a low double lotus base, the treatment of the robe—foldless, with robe end over the left shoulder and the lower garment both clearly indicated. The folded *sanghati* is on the middle of the left shoulder; the robe leaves the Buddha's right shoulder bare. His head is surmounted by the *usnisa*, lyre-shaped in this example. Above the Buddha is an arched shrine of 'makara torana throne' type, crowned by an extended *kirtimukha* in a form very clearly that of eighteenth century Ceylon. However, numerous additional figures protrude from the arch, which appear much more similar to Burmese decorative motifs found in wooden structures in Amarapura and Mandalay.

The treatment of the face is linear and symmetrical, the *usnisa* is characteristic, if summary, and robe edges, nipple and ankle are simply but clearly incised. The *urnā* is never shown. (South Indian religious images of the thirteenth century and Ceylonese Buddha images of a somewhat later period both indicate close affinities.)

8. Seated Buddha, Singhalese type

Mrauk-u Museum, Arakan

height: 17 cm, Buddha image 7 cm

provenance: Vesali

Bronze; solid cast in two pieces, with hollow pedestal. Finely-executed incised decoration of pedestal. Unusually handsome Buddha image with lyre-shaped *usnisa* rising above the Buddha's hair. Buddha seated in *dhiana mudra*, the legs are in *virasana*. Two pillars each with

capitals and bases in the form of lotuses, which are supporting *makara toranas* with lion-face motif. Above, a heavily decorated arch, in floral motif, rests upon the lions' heads. The apex of the arch is crowned by a *kirtimukha* figure, integrated into the arch, rather than elevated above it. The Buddha image itself appears to be considerably older than the *makara torana* and pedestal, i.e. the Buddha is probably from the fourteenth or fifteenth century, while the shrine and throne could be dated to the seventeenth as predicated on the lion motif decorations.

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